

DECEMBER'S DEBT

Foreword

The idea for this piece of complete-fiction originated from a conversation regarding a mysterious coat, which had been left hanging in a cloakroom for quite a long time.

But unlike most lost-and-found items, this particular garment had a name stitched inside.

However, when the staff looked up the owner's details, they discovered that this individual had not been a member of their organisation for more than ten years.

An intriguing story which sparked my imagination, and I thought it would be a great starting point for a Christmas ghost story; and Just as I spent a few weeks crafting my little effort, I invite you to take a personal myth or anecdote and turn it into a captivating narrative for us all to enjoy.

Paul.

Post Script

A practical lesson from this tale: be sure to clearly label your belongings, especially when storing them in a community cloakroom.

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December's Debt

Winter solstice just days away and the sun is already below the horizon, casting diffused sepia light through the windows of a small, sparsely furnished dining room where a well-worn typewriter's carriage return mechanism rattles softly as it recoils back to its starting point.

Beside the table is an oxygen cylinder standing upright, securely housed in a purpose built metal and wheeled trolley.

A seated lady pulls a respirator mask close to her face, wheezing loudly and squinting as she breathes deeply, yet in spite of her obviously uncomfortable condition and with a defiant air, she cracks her knuckles and continues typing.

The caretaker

My name is Elizabeth Porter and I have been the oily rag at the Magdalene Institute of Technology for nearly five years but due to health issues, specifically, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, caused by inhaling toxic smoke and asbestos dust, I am unable to work.

So please forgive my flare for the dramatic because on the following pages I will, to the best of my recollection,

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share with you an extraordinary story and one in which yours truly stars; but as I sit here, fingers poised over the keys of this old electronic typewriter, I am hoping that its ribbon will hold out just a little longer so I can get it all down on paper before I run out of time.

It was a compilation of key evidence, including CCTV footage, text messages, and emails, that ultimately led a jury to find the school's top administrators guilty, so I make no apologies for incorporating those facts into my personal narrative of the tragic events that occurred at Magdalene I.T. where three additional lives were lost.

The place of those tragic events, the school's Technical Block, has been demolished and replaced with a garden that surrounds a tall stone memorial, paying tribute to four people who perished; two police officers, a staff member and a student.

- Lily Nancarrow
- Matthew Roskelley
- Morgan Griffiths
- Osas Olukemi

Yet when all is done, I suspect my own name will not be inscribed, due to the fact I provided incriminating testimony against my soon to be, former employer.

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The First Fire

Twelve years ago and a week before Christmas, on the last day of this school's term, children were boisterous.

A flood of grey jumpers streamed into a classroom and Osas was amongst them, rubbing shoulders with friends as she hung up her coat, which quickly became buried inside a forest of rapidly growing wintery garb.

And whilst the poor teacher attempted to reach some decorum from the cacophonous excitement, a combination of old electrical wiring and forgotten dusty documents were kindling an inferno in the loft above.

The Fifth

More than a decade since that fateful event and once again the school has emptied for the Christmas break, leaving behind only those tasked with the mundane duty of clearing up the remnants of the day's activities.

Above, corridor ceiling lights flicker and chink, giving a collection of tarnished hanging seasonal decorations the appearance of motion, whilst below, an electronic floor polishing machine stands idle on a well-trod floor.

A classroom door hangs ajar.

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Inside, a Nigerian lady quietly weeps, cradling a small parcel, whispering words of peace in her native language, Yoruba, before gently placing the bundle into a pocket of a long forgotten winter garment.

To claim her child's possession and take it away from here, would be an acceptance that her fourteen year old daughter will never return, either to her mother's embrace or this place which once offered so much hope, for a new and better life.

Such grief.

It never leaves us and it will never leave here; but she must go and so after softly brushing dust from her child's winter coat she silently closes the door behind her.

7:30 pm and this school's caretaker does her final rounds, strategically leaving some lights on whilst making sure that the majority are turned off; a simple security measure giving those who would forcibly break and enter, pause for thought.

Flickering strip lights.

It is not just the bulbs but the whole circuitry that needs replacing and she has highlighted the dangers of poorly maintained wiring many times but alas; and tonight those zaps and chinks are even more noisier than usual, as if the ceiling is whispering a strange language.

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Elizabeth has been this school's caretaker for three years and in that time she has seen and heard it all, from top brass financial excuses to sleeping and cheeky students so when a silhouette catches her attention through a distant classroom window, she lets out a long breath of frustration.

It has been a long day and all she wants to do is set the school's intruder alarm and go home.

Pushing open a large main entrance door, Elizabeth steps outside where frosty paving slabs and grass glisten with flood lamp light.

The long Technical Block corridor exterior windows are all dark except one and something is moving.

Cautiously she crosses a lawn and a soft flowerbed to get a closer view through the lit window where an open door inside is allowing corridor lights to project in, but when a shadow precedes a silhouette the door suddenly closes and immerses the classroom in darkness.

It is late December, cold, dark and Elizabeth is alone; so, without hesitation she retrieves a mobile telephone from her back pocket and quickly presses the 'Emergency' button from which after just a few seconds she requests police attention.

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Then whilst dialling another staff member, she turns on her heels and hastily heads towards the school exit where a beeping gate lock clunks in response to her identity card.

At 7:55 pm Elizabeth's manager, Morgan, is the first to arrive, immediately beckoning her subordinate to sit in the passenger seat and safety of her large, warm car.

"Thank you Morgan for coming back out here," Elizabeth says apologetically as she climbs into the passenger seat of her manager's large hybrid vehicle, but her gratitude is quickly overshadowed by a pungent and overwhelming smell of stale animal odour that hits her as soon as she settles in.

Morgan waves a hand, "No, no. You have done exactly what you should have done Elizabeth. How many intruders did you see?"

"Just one," replies Elizabeth, covertly fiddling with door controls, "Would you mind if I open a window?"

"Could you tell what they were wearing?" Morgan asks, seemingly oblivious to the sudden rush of fresh air as the passenger side window quietly slides open.

Surprised by the question, Elizabeth searches her memory, "Erm, they were dressed in a dark coat or hoody from what I could see," she replies, her eyes darting

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subtly behind her as she tries to take in her surroundings without being too obvious.

Morgan takes a moment to formulate her next question, "... Which was it would you say, a hoody or a coat?"

Elizabeth puffs her cheeks in thought, "A winter coat or rain coat. The hood was quite large, larger than a typical hoody."

"I see. Thank you," says Morgan who calmly taps the touch screen of her car's dashboard, causing a flurry of floating animal hair to suddenly become visible.

Car speakers amplify dialling tones.

"Hello Morgan," comes a booming voice.

"Good evening Pat. I am sitting in the car with the school's caretaker Elizabeth who has seen a lone intruder walking the corridors of the technical block, wearing a rain coat."

A deep sighing breath reverberates over loudspeakers, before Patricia asks, "Are you both safe?"

"Yes, we are in my car on the road away from the school premises and Elizabeth has already called the police."

"Is there any evidence of fire yet?" the booming voice asks.

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Morgan looks at Elizabeth, putting her on the spot to answer the headmistress's question.

"Erm, no I could not smell or see any evidence of a fire, why would there be?" splutters Elizabeth whilst waving away a fleet of floating fur that is slowly approaching her face.

"Hello Elizabeth, are you okay?" Patricia asks.

"Yes I am."

"Good. Look, I will be there in fifteen to twenty minutes, to speak to the police. Neither of you go back into the school premises tonight. Is that clear Morgan?" and without waiting for an answer the telephone call terminates.

Morgan taps the screen, turning off the bright display, immediately rendering the hovering hound hair invisible; but turns away to look out of her dirty, paw printed car door window before speaking once more.

"Twelve years ago there was a fire and eight people were seriously burned but a child died. A Nigerian girl, Osas Olukemi. Osas had only been with us for a year. She was very clever, gifted I would say. She wanted to be a veterinary surgeon of some sort. Cats, she loved cats, big cats, small cats, obsessed with them," and Morgan rubs

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her forehead as if attempting to relieve a spiking head pain.

She continues, "Mrs Olukemi came to this country with baby Osas, through very rough circumstances but was able to gain citizenship. An unimaginable story of exploitation and determination. I know that Patricia felt it to be an honour having Osas Olukemi as part of this school's history, but ..." Morgan pauses, "... Faulty wiring. The fire alarms never went off."

Elizabeth tries to make a connection between what Morgan is muttering and their intruder, "Are you saying the school has a firebug?"

"In a manor of speaking, yes," says Morgan and after checking her driver's side mirror she turns back to Elizabeth who appears to be having trouble removing something revolting from her mouth.

"Nine years ago there was another fire, then six years ago and the last one happened just before you came onboard, in the same part of the school at roughly the same time of night and in each case a single, hooded, coat wearing individual has been seen."

"I see." says Elizabeth fumbling with her door handle, "Why don't we get out?"

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"We are quite sure we know who it is," says Morgan nodding.

"Have you told the police?" and stepping back into the crisp, cold and fluff free winter air, Elizabeth's voice fades.

Morgan shakes her head whilst scanning her rear view mirrors, "No. They would not believe us. We, Patricia and myself hardly believe it."

But Elizabeth has wandered off, having absolutely no interest in her manager's nonsensical monotone mumblings.

Unlatching her safety belt, Morgan speaks, "What is important, is that you are safe ..." but then sadly realises, with much disappointment, that no one is listening to her.

So reaching over to the back seat she picks up a well chewed, dog's toy and cradles it for a moment before getting out and walking the few paces towards the school's entrance gates where she presents her identity card and enters.

Headlights approach, as two vehicles emerge from the distance, coming to rest on opposite sides of the road.

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Police officers remain in their car but the headmistress, who is now parked behind Morgan's empty vehicle, hastily exits hers and looks for someone to yell at.

"Where is Morgan?" she shouts.

Elizabeth, who, along with the police car, is also on the opposite side of the road, from where she points at the entrance gates, "She just went into the school."

To which Patricia barks, "I told you both to stay outside!"

"I am outside!" replies Elizabeth with equal volume.

But ignoring her subordinate's obvious retort Patricia swiftly strides across the road and raps her knuckles sharply on the passenger window of the police car; and rolling it down, the female officer inside politely instructs Patricia, "Madam, please step back so that I can open the door."

The headmistress grudgingly complies, but her concern is immediate and palpable. "We have reason to believe there's an arsonist on the school grounds."

"An arsonist?" queries the police officer.

"Yes and ..."

The uniformed lady holds up a hand and shows Patricia her forefinger.

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Dressed in a bright yellow vest that is adorned with various gadgets, the female police officer presses a series of buttons on one of the devices and speaks, apparently inducing her colleague, the driver to also exit their vehicle and join that other person who is looking a bit fed up, standing out here in the cold.

"Hello, can you tell me what your name is please?" asks the male officer.

"Elizabeth Porter, I'm the caretaker and the one who called the police."

"Ah, good. Your friend seems to be in a bit of a state. Can you tell me what is going on."

Elizabeth puffs her cheeks, "Yeah, she's a bit mental."

Patiently the officer repeats his question, "Elizabeth, why did you call the police?"

"Oh, sorry," and waving in the direction of the school's main reception area, Elizabeth recalls what happened, "I was closing up and I saw someone in the Technical Block. That building should be empty. The whole school should be empty."

The yellow clad man is nodding but also appears to be listening to voices from his large black ear piece and with a hand poised on his radio thingy, asks, "Why is the

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headmaster or mistress concerned about an arsonist? If there was a fire we would probably hear an alarm of some sort, maybe see some flames."

"Well, my manager has just gone into the school grounds to have a look. I think ..."

But he interrupts, cutting her off in mid sentence, "Someone else has gone into the school?"

"Yes, Morgan, my manager. A few minutes ago."

The police officer speaks urgently into the radio device on his vest and within seconds, the other officer is trotting along the pavement to join them, "How do we get into the school?"

Removing a lanyard from around her neck, Elizabeth says, "Use this on the gate keypad. It will also open any door on the school premises."

Both police officers smile but the male says, "Excellent, Elizabeth, thank you. My colleague is going to stay with you and the headmaster until some more of our colleagues arrive, while I go and find ... sorry, what did you say your manager's name is?"

But before Elizabeth can respond, the female officer chimes in, "Morgan Griffiths."

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So, with an identity card hanging from its ribbon, the male police officer quickly walks the short distance to the school's entrance where a beep and a clang from the gate, resound as he passes through.

In a pale and cold winter light, the frosty pavement reflects dull, and though the engine of this police car is not running, a strange repetitive hum still emanates from its vivid and pulsating blues.

Patricia, dressed in a long professional-looking coat, sits in the back seat, her face illuminated by the glow of a telephone's touch screen as fingers move rapidly, typing a flurry of text messages, again and again; but her increasing agitation and body language suggests that there is more going on here than just a possible interloper sneaking around her work place.

Police vehicle speakers crackle into life.

"Lily. I think I've found Morgan. Morgan, can you hear me? I'm a police officer ..." The voice trails off into silence for a moment, before erupting into a frantic cry, "Jesus Christ, what the hell is that? Jesus Christ, what ... Lily, call the fire brigade, we have a fire. I'm going to bring Morgan out. There's something in here running around and it's on fire. Jesus ..."

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The voice falls silent again, before resuming in a panicked tone, "Jesus Christ! Morgan, come on. Shit, you're heavy. Morgan. Come on, help me out here. Morgan please ... stand up, that's it. Come on. Oh shit, the door is locked. Where's the card? Shit. Where's the bloody card ... Jesus ..."

The air is filled with an unsettling silence, punctuated only by the occasional chirping noise from a police radio.

Lily's voice is laced with concern as she speaks into her vest, "Matthew, what's going on? Matthew?"

But before she can get a response, "Look!" Elizabeth shouts, pointing towards the school.

Bright flames flicker above the tree line.

Lily rapidly barks orders into her vest radio, before taking off in a sprint towards the school entrance but as she runs, she turns to Elizabeth and shouts, "How do I get through the gates?"

Elizabeth quickly dashes across the road and after entering her personal pin code into the keypad, she turns to Lily and says, "You're going to need help, let me help."

Lily's expression is serious as she responds, "Okay, let me lead. Stay behind me at all times and do as I say please otherwise I'll get the sack, okay?"

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Elizabeth nods in agreement.

And once they enter, the scene is terrifying.

One end of the school's Technical Block is completely consumed by raging flames that are bursting through windows, sending shards of glass shattering to the ground.

And the smoke; plumes of thick and rolling trunks, belching out of shattered windows accompanied by an intense and unsettling roar which is surely not of this world.

Elizabeth is pointing, her voice barely audible above the din, "There's a door to your right! I'll have to enter my code again!"

"Go! Unlock the door but do not open it. Elizabeth, do not open the door! Unlock it and stand back."

A wail of sirens can just about be heard in the distance.

Lily carefully approaches the now unlocked Technical Block entrance, the back of her hand extended to test the temperature of the surface, repeating the process with the metal handle, her movements slow and deliberate.

Finally, she eases the entrance open, her eyes scanning the interior for any signs of danger as a small amount of grey fumes crawls towards them.

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The female police officer turns to Elizabeth, "Stand behind me and put your hands on my shoulders. Do not let go. Elizabeth, I am counting on you to pull me out, okay?"

Elizabeth nods, her eyes wide with concern, as she positions herself behind Lily, grasping the police officer's yellow vest with an adrenalin fuelled grip.

Lily shines a torch, its beam searching the floor, "Matthew!" she calls, "Matthew!"

Hot air and smoke is quickly becoming unbearable but as she struggles to catch her breath, Lily sees a flash of Matthew's high-visibility vest; and with Elizabeth still clinging to her from behind, she conjures as much volume as physically possible, her words punctuated by involuntary coughing, "Elizabeth ... I can see Matthew," she pauses, " ... And Morgan."

Matthew's body suddenly raises itself up onto one elbow, his voice weak but urgent, "Get her ... Get Morgan out," and with a Herculean effort, Matthew begins to slide Morgan's limp body slowly across the floor, inching her closer to the two women.

His partner doesn't hesitate and grabbing hold of whatever she can of Morgan, yells, "Pull us, Elizabeth.

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Pull us out girl!" her voice, a desperate plea as thick grey smoke and heat close in around them.

At the exit, Lily and Elizabeth are wracked with agony, their lungs burning but Lily's training and instincts take over, gesturing for Elizabeth to stay with Morgan while she goes back to rescue Matthew.

And so with a deep breath, Lily re-enters the corridor, her eyes almost blinded, the flesh around them swollen with pain but even though her torch is penetrating no more than a metre, she stumbles upon Matthew once more, literally tripping over him.

She leans her back into it and pulls him towards the exit, one step, two steps but her breathing is all but useless and she can do nothing more than lay down.

Lily whispers an apology.

Then something catches her attention; a dark, hooded figure ahead of her, its body ablaze, sliding from side to side across the corridor, arms outstretched and as it moves, walls ignite, thunderous, shooting debris in all directions.

Flames spread rapidly and as the figure gets closer and closer to Lily, its screams grow louder and more intense, until it finally lets out a blood-curdling shriek before a powerful jet of water blasts the phantom, sending it

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tumbling backward into the toxic abyss, from whence it came.

Through the fog and her fading breaths, Lily can just make out the shape of firefighters dragging hose pipes.

The lifeless Police officers are quickly fitted with oxygen masks and their bodies dragged into the playground, where first aid is administered by paramedics.

Morgan is badly burned; her face and head terribly scorched, her clothes fused to her flesh and though her eyes are partially open she is unresponsive.

Elizabeth however has fared the best and is seated in the relative warmth of the school's reception space, wrapped in a green ambulance coat and is simultaneously holding a mask to her face and operating a rubber hand pump to self-administer air.

A Christmas tree, decorated with a few strands of tinsel, is bathed in a kaleidoscope of colours as the flashing blue and red lights of emergency service vehicles cast a flickering glow on the sparse festive scene.

Outside, the playground is surrounded by smoke and torch beams, with helmeted figures holding hose pipes, police officers in high-visibility gear and a multitude of emergency service personnel.

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And the Technical Block, only recently rebuilt and furnished, is once again little more than a charred and smouldering carcass.

That could be the end of this story

Morgan Griffiths died on the frozen concrete of the school grounds, Matthew Roskelley never regained consciousness and Lily Nancarrow also passed away hours later, but realising she had little time left to live and through very laboured breathing, gave two attending nurses her dying declaration which they recorded on a mobile telephone.

"I need to tell you what I saw ... The fire alarms ... Failed ... A hooded figure ... Surrounded by flames ... It wanted that woman ... But Matthew tried to save her ... Help Matthew ..."

Inscribed on a tall, chiselled, granite monument, above four names, are the words:

To honour the memories of those who lost their lives, we remember their unwavering spirit and bravery.

The paved pentagon, once immaculately maintained, now lays strewn with the remnants of autumn's decay but on one of the green metal seats, a Nigerian lady is sitting,

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her dark features, a striking contrast to these dull winter surroundings.

Across her lap, a winter coat lays draped.

With her eyes fixed on the stone memorial, she takes a few steps forward before placing a small figurine of a sleeping cat at its base, where others already lay.

But murmured conversations of her arriving co-workers, drift from the school's reception area, so with the coat in her arms, Mrs Olukemi's fingers gently trace the inscribed name of her daughter, before turning away to join the other cleaning staff.

Once inside, Mrs Olukemi walks the familiar maze of school corridors and enters a classroom, because there is something she must do before starting her duties.

The hooded coat she is carrying, is carefully placed on a hook, where she gently brushes away creases and neatly straightens the arms whilst whispering words of peace.

And then she leaves.

Inside the child's garment, just below the manufacturer's label, is a separate white piece of fabric that has been manually sewn, with a name written in red ink:

Osas Olukemi

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Last Word

A full moon.

A cold breeze whispers through a large open window, the night's clean air, refreshing.

An unoccupied armchair's worn upholstery, is just visible under neatly folded blankets.

Two decorative table lamps are positioned strategically on a wooden table and illuminate an author's work area, where Elizabeth Porter eventually stops typing, and leaning forward to read her final words, she gently removes the last page from the machine.

Elisabeth's respiration is shallow and struggled, but curiously visible in this room, which currently lacks any degree of warmth that would distinguish it from the temperature outside.

Looking at the pile of paper beside her which comprises her narrative, she carefully appends to it, her last page, placing a hand on top of the document, as a statement of affirmation.

Then, with both palms flat against the table's surface, and in defiance of a disease which is rapidly consuming her, she whispers a single satisfying word: "Done"